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Piracy Cultures

Benjamin, BitTorrent, Bootlegs: Auratic Piracy Cultures?

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Seventy-five years ago, Walter Benjamin showed us that the line between “production” and “reproduction” had begun to blur. Reproduction was no longer optional, consequential, and degrading (the shredding of the original’s aura), but was instead being transformed into a principle of production itself: Something was produced bearing in mind how it was to be reproduced. No longer did the original exist (in photography, film, music recordings), but instead, there was diffusion, exhibition. The work existed precisely at the time and place of its enjoyment. Today, the cultural pirates of the new digital era take this principle to the extreme, with a certain characteristic also foreseen by Benjamin: a yearning to participate, to post-produce something captured in order to later return it to the Internet, modified in some way and made available to others. This postproduction is what is now often mixed up with reception, just as production and reproduction were in Benjamin’s day. Postproduction on the receiver’s side, which somehow augments and extends the received work—in other words, creates an etymologically rigorous *author-ization* (*auctor* as the root of both *author* and *augmentation*). The cultural pirate only deserves redemption thanks to this creative augmentation.

From Product to Re-Product

The most cited and renowned of Walter Benjamin’s works¹ can still be read today, without much

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¹ “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” was written in 1936, but not translated into English until 1969, in a book edited by Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations* (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 217–251). That was the year of the Berlin Olympics, Picasso’s “Guernica,” Riefenstahl’s “Triumph of the Will” and Chaplin’s “Modern Times”—in other words, when old technologies were new. . Benjamin’s work has yielded a vast bibliography over the past 20 years, particularly after the publication of *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999b)). Many relevant works can be found in the article by Isenberg (2001), while *New German Critique* magazine has devoted several issues to the author: 17 (1979), 39 (1986), and 83 (2001). With regard to technical reproducibility in Benjamin, see Buck-Morss (1989), Carroll (1998), Kaufman (2002), Koepnick (2002) and several essays in Gumbrecht and Marrinan (2003) and Patt (2001).

effort, as the first treatise on multimedia cultural piracy. Let us briefly recall the text. First, Benjamin reminded us that the reproduction of images dates back to the age-old tradition of minting coins and the serial manufacturing of bronze and terra-cotta pieces. This copying of images by the hundreds was perfected thanks to such technological developments as xylography, contemporary with printing, and much later, toward the end of the 18th century, lithography. However, none of these techniques were even remotely capable of reaching the quotas achieved by photography in the mid-19th century. In fact, throughout this journey, starting with photography and moving on through film, the very concept of "original" itself obviously loses consistency: The original is already a copy, and the distance between future copies and the first is irrelevant. The work is no longer at its place of origin, nor does it show evidence or traces of such an origin (which is what is meant by "original"), but instead, it exists precisely at the time and place of its distribution, where neither its accuracy (guaranteed by technology), nor its origin (converted into a fetishism which increases its exchange-value, but not the aesthetic pleasure which the copies can also provide) play any essential role.

Benjamin seems to laud, in any case in a prudent and subtle manner, artwork which is able to break away from its sacred origins, with its own specific time and place, and special and specialized officiants. In other words, he praises artwork which, while still being a work of art, does not claim to be an original, but is diffused around the world as reproduction reaching the masses to whom art and culture had previously been inaccessible. Furthermore, Benjamin foresaw the concept of "mass narcissism" as an effect of technical reproducibility. In cinema halls, the masses are not only witness to an imaginary and inaccessible world, but also to a world they themselves occupy, filling the streets on marches and demonstrations, on strike or in celebration; attending mass events, political rallies, sporting events; even fighting in wars. Obviously, the full magnitude of this is not something that the demonstrators themselves could appreciate, nor could they replay it at will. Neither could they form part of a causal history in which they were collectively included as protagonists—masses as actors in a narrative.

Faced with the anguish felt by his friend Adorno, Benjamin intuitively knew that a new dawn awaited the arts. In addition, by no means had arts such as painting, theater, or music suffered due to inventions like photography, film, and industrial phonography. It was possible for the painter, playwright, and composer to incorporate these new technologies into their work, and in so doing, to adapt their creations to the requirements imposed by reproducibility. All of these factors could serve not only as sources of motivation, but also for the projection of works unto previously unreachable audiences.

The aura of the original, "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be," is lost in reproduction, according to Benjamin (1969, pp. 221–230). As he states in *The Arcades Project*, reproduction sees the aura give way to the trace, which is a sign both of intimate possession, and at the same time, of irretrievable loss (1999b, p. 447). The aura is the authentic and singular existence of a work of art; it is what gives an account of its material origin, as a thing in the world, and of a tradition from which said work is nourished and upon which said work has an effect, becoming a part of that tradition. Be it manual or technical, reproduction omits these qualities of the original work and the aura, in which they reside, disappears. The aura is what cannot be reproduced, what cannot be pirated: "[T]here can," as Benjamin puts it, "be no replica of it." So, what happens if the mere concept of "original" loses meaning in a photochemical cultural production (as a static or moving image) which is essentially (not

optionally) reproducible and therefore not anchored to a time and a place, to an epiphany, or to the uniqueness of its expression, but is, rather, a nomadic production? (1969, pp. 224, 244).

Benjamin noted the turning point which photography and film brought to aesthetics, phenomenology, and even ethics of reproduction. Photography and film are technical reproductions which undermine the notion of "original," and which switch the focus of interest from the work as a singularity that physically retains the creator's touch to a vision of the work as a multipliable and liberated piece which removes distinctions between original and copy, between early and late, between here and there and therefore, Benjamin suggests, removes distinctions between creator and audience. The nature of the new arts in technical reproducibility is, precisely, to remove itself from the ritual, the uniqueness and concentration, the time and place, the privileged audience, and instead, project itself to an undefined space and moment, and to a completely unknown audience—a mass audience "whose sense of the universal equality of things has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (1969, p. 223).

When using such methods, the author is aware that he or she is working to promote traffic, public access, and convenient availability, as well as a process, a flow, and an audience of potential consumers of copies. Does the aura itself become reproducible, leaving the original, if there is one, without any claim to a stake? Does technical reproduction, the shredding of the aura, become its hiding place?

It is true that Benjamin's position with regard to the destruction of the aura is ambivalent. He tackles the subject in "The Work of Art . . ." and on three other occasions,² to the point where it can be said without exaggeration that his reflections on the aura permeated the intellectual output of the last 10 years of his life. Benjamin oscillated between a "liquidationist" and an "elegiac" attitude to the aura, just as he oscillates in his writings between a specific conception (the aura upon the arrival of photography and film) and another, more general (one could say "experiential") conception, between an aesthetic and an ethical vision. In any case, and seeking to reconcile these perspectives, we could say that, for Benjamin, it is not so much that the aura can be derived from some objects (paintings and theatrical productions) and not from others (photographs and films), but rather, that there is a fundamental category of experience, memory, and perception which imbues people's ways of looking at the world, at others, and at works of art, and that said category is now disappearing under the weight of new technologies in technical reproducibility, which is both an opportunity and a danger. We could say that 1) an aura becomes less a property of the *object* and more a quality of the *subject* of the perception, a special sensitivity that allows this subject to perceive the world and works of art auratically, and 2) what is important, in this instance, is attitude, the *use* the subjects make of their ability to look and see in each case (Costello, 2005).

² One such occasion, which predates that quoted, is his "Little History of Photography" (1931/1999, pp. 507–530), with the other two—subsequent—occasions being "On some motifs in Baudelaire" (1939/1968, pp. 155–200), particularly Epigraph XI, and some of the texts by the convulse J (Baudelaire) of *The Arcades Project* (1999b, pp. 228–386), which date from a similar period to the aforementioned text (between 1937 and 1940).

Let us consider for a moment a fully “auratic” example: *The Scream*, by Edward Munch. Curators of the Munch Museum in Oslo doubt that they will ever be able to repair the damage the painting suffered during its theft and subsequent recovery. The board was wet in some areas, and the painting had deteriorated so much that it seems it will be difficult to ever restore its original tonalities. This example, though unfortunate, gives pause for thought. On the one hand, Munch is considered a careless and almost even negligent painter in the completion of his works, often considering them finished, even when they showed signs of accidental marks or scratches. Who knows if the painting we were familiar with was not the result of luck and chance, even more than artwork usually is? The incidence of its theft was the most passionate adventure of its entire life as an artistic object, beyond the boring comfort of the Norwegian museum, where it was held under controlled temperature, humidity, and lighting conditions. No one dares to question whether the event of its theft and recovery has been lucrative for the museum and added to the painter’s renown: This event is an added value to Munch’s biography and the countless interpretations of his work. It is comparable in some ways to the lost head of the Winged Victory of Samothrace and the mutilated arms of the Venus de Milo.

The difference is that we have known Munch’s painting in its (relative) completeness and integrity, while these statues have reached us and become part of the history of art with their beautiful defects. The painting, contrary to these statues, has been copied and photographed thousands of times, and had been reproduced a million times over on postcards, picture cards, posters, t-shirts, etc. prior to its deterioration. Thus, the curators must turn to these copies, born of technical reproducibility, in order to restore the initial appearance of the board as far as possible, in such a way that it will be the reproduction that will serve as proof of expertise in restoring the original, and not the original—now not so original and not so suggestive of its origin, but rather, corrupted by the circumstances of its theft. The reproduction is therefore the guarantee of accuracy. In a way, the copies are now more authentic than the original itself, more loyal to the author’s will when he decided his work was completed. Munch created up to four different versions of the painting, two of which—not one—were stolen, in 1994 and 2004, and recovered soon afterwards. The differences between these versions are clearly distinguishable, though Munch did not identify any one as superior to the others. Was Munch himself trying out a type of “serial” process in the creation of his own original work? Was he reproducing himself in a chirographic sense? Was Munch the first copier of *The Scream*? His own first pirate?

This anecdote, to which so many equivalents can be found in the history of painting, outlines the paradox which Benjamin had to confront, and which must still give us pause for thought today. The paradox of a photograph which can unquestionably crush the aura with the disquieting (but incomplete, frustrated) likeness it presents to us and with the (viscous, not friendly) closeness it imposes, but which is often that which is responsible for preserving that aura, that which testifies to something that the damaged original can no longer guarantee. And not only this, it is also responsible for *feeding* the aura, for exalting it: Is it not true that the photograph of a work of art, which allows it to be reproduced in catalogs for museums and exhibitions, in encyclopedias, textbooks and history of art essays, and which has recently multiplied its dissemination and global circulation through the internet, is far from an insignificant factor in the ever-renewed prestige, the topicality of said work? (Malraux, 1947/1978).

Let us consider for a moment the differences between, on the one hand, this act of actual theft and attempted piracy (as the thieves undoubtedly intended to trade in the stolen work) and, on the other, an act of online pillaging. Obviously, we must condemn the theft or destruction of an original, which is not only a criminal act, but also an irreparable loss for art as an institution and heritage. But what are we to say about the *multiplication* of an original? Does it call for the same judgment? Internet pillaging obviously involves digital copies, rather than a unique and irreplaceable original. And digital copies are, as we shall see, qualitatively different from chirographic copies: the practice of “secondary” copying (copying in an attempt to supplant the original, to usurp its prestige) no longer exists. This secundarization of copying has no meaning in the digital world, as we are dealing with identical duplicates, rather than copies. Digital copying is a form of transportation which does not, however, move what has been copied from its original place, which does not seek to supplant but which in any case seeks a circulation that is difficult to restrict (Bunz, 2007). A circulation, yes, but also a rewrite, an alteration which, again, does not suppose the corruption of the original. Let us suppose that the thieves of the Munch paintings had been a mixture of admirers and frustrated painters. And they had wanted to add their own brush strokes to the original, to in a way renew Munch, update him. It seems absurd, yes, but this is what hundreds of internet pirates are and what they do, as can be seen by anybody who types “The Scream” into Google Images. From Macaulay Culkin to Homer Simpson, from Tarzan to Eric Northman (the latter being one of the stars of the series *True Blood*), from the mask used by the killer in the *Scream* saga (named, by no coincidence, after the Munch painting) to Senator Harry Reid—they have all been lifted by outside hands into the place of that anguished face, to varying degrees of success and creativity. New faces which perhaps (coincidences of this type have been seen before) occupy just the spot in which the corruption of the canvas due to its theft and handling could be most pronounced. And this is in a playful way, one that does no harm to the original held in Oslo, which will be restored (or not) thanks to photographs. Furthermore, it is in a way which poses no threat either to the history of the painting (nor, admittedly, does it substantially improve it), or to the copyright held by Munch’s heirs, should there be such a thing.³

Reproducible Arts and the Reproducibility of the Arts

With great insight, Benjamin defined a point of inflection not so much between the chirographical and technographical arts (painting and photography, respectively), but rather between arts for the purpose of producing an original and arts in which the notion of original loses value in favor of a multitude of “copies” available to the public. The issue is not, strictly speaking, a matter of technology: Our notion of “technological” is history-based, but, upon further reflection, chirography also requires technology, whether paintbrush, stage, pen, chisel, flute, or violin. An artistic genius has never been hindered by these more or less refined technical instruments, which have allowed his or her self-expression through

³ Umberto Eco devotes several chapters of *The Limits of Interpretation* to both serials of a work (#5 “Interpreting Serials”) and forgeries (#12 “Fakes and Forgeries”; Eco, 1994). While Munch’s serials are similar to what Eco describes in the case of De Chirico (non-identical copies by the author which are but slight variations on the same theme), the “textual poachers” we are dealing with, whether analog (Jenkins, 1992) or digital (Jenkins, 2006b), practice an intertextuality which does not seek to plagiarize, falsify, or supplant, but rather, to play.

the modeling of a material, but rather, the test of his or her art has been precisely his or her ability to dominate the techniques required to bring imagination to life in the form of artwork.

The crux of the matter lies in the development and perfection of technology and the skills for reproduction—all reprographic techniques, in the broadest sense, from the press to the laser printer, photographic, sound/music, cinematographic, and also broadcasting-related technologies (radio, television, video, Internet) which appear to offer a point of convergence or overlap with production-related technologies and skills. We refer to the critical moment in which, for example, a camera points its lens at paintings exhibited in museums, at sculptures, at monuments and buildings, and thereby allows their reproduction through illustrated cards (Malraux, 1978), or the moment in which a musician's live performance is reproduced at a distance or recorded (Szendy, 2008).

But then, what Benjamin documents and theorizes about is precisely that period in the history of technology at the service of creation during which the line between production and reproduction blurs. Paradoxically, this occurs to the point where reproduction both "precedes" production and becomes its ultimate purpose: Something is produced bearing in mind how it will look or sound once it is reproduced and the devices, supports, and reproductive formats with which it will be reproduced. The creator is perfectly aware that of the whole he or she produces, the only part that counts is the part that goes on to be reproduced—let's call it the "reproduct": the negatives from which positive images will be created, enlarged, and eventually exhibited or published; the takes that will become the final shots in the film; the recorded chords and vocalizations which will compose the corresponding soundtrack. Meanwhile, these same reproduction techniques do not simply involve a carefully thought-out selection or reduction of the whole that was recorded before the camera or microphone, but they also provide a mine of expressive resources which alter (by stylizing, hyper-realizing, dramatizing, ridiculing, cleaning, equalizing, synthesizing, and sampling) what has been saved on photographic film, motion picture reels, sound recordings, or digital archives.

The record industry provides a clear example. Doesn't a pop or rock artist compose a song or collection of songs to be recorded on an album in a studio where technical manipulations and virtuosités are carried out that are impossible during a live performance? Also, don't we often yearn to adapt a live concert performance, the "copy," to the recording we have listened to previously, our original? Even when we seek a different experience at the live concert, a more direct musicality, isn't this live concert itself often recorded for marketing purposes, whether as an audio (a music CD of the *live* concert) or audiovisual product (a reproducible DVD for viewing on the TV or computer screen)? The performance's dynamics concerning time and space are subjected to the needs of the sound or video recordings. Just to make things even more complicated, isn't this video recording projected live on giant screens for the public *in situ*? A crowd so large that, for the majority, the only option is to watch the live broadcast of the performance, in this case not on television, but on *proxivision*, in a rigorously etymological sense. Isn't it true that the *live* retransmission, in using multiple cameras and audio takes, offers a different experience, but one which is probably richer in sound and visually than that enjoyed by the front-row spectator at the foot of the stage? The other spectator (the ambivalent one) is able to experience the real presence of the artist and his or her work (the aura?), as well as the contagious mood of a multitudinous congregation, all while receiving the detail and quality provided by audiovisual reproduction technologies.

Nevertheless, this paradoxical precedence and preference of the recording or retransmission of the performance does not only occur in pop music. A classical music composer or performer may prefer a recording, i.e., performing for a recording device under favorable conditions, over a live public performance. Let's take Stravinski and Glenn Gould as two opposing paradigmatic cases. In the early 20th century, due to his concerns about the distortions that his written, perhaps interpreted albeit unrecorded, work could suffer at the hands of Hollywood (e.g., the arrangements of *The Rite of Spring* for *Fantasia*), Stravinski struggled between preventing such manipulation and his general disapproval of mechanical recordings and personally controlling said recordings, or in other words, of establishing an approved version of his work which would prevent or discredit as mere rearrangements all of those which, whether he liked it or not, would eventually be produced by the music or film industry. Conversely, Glenn Gould detested exhibiting his performance-based virtuosity and preferred to lock himself away in a recording studio and transform the production of records into his "art." In other words, Gould decided to take advantage of the fact that technical reproducibility could finally separate the musical performance from the listening experience, after centuries of necessarily coinciding, and thus edit the recording that mediated between the two to create a montage of different performances, perhaps even recorded at different times.⁴ The same is true for music lovers: For them, it can no longer be a live performance by the conductors Menuhin, Bernstein, or Von Karajan that they adore, but rather, the recordings of these performances which, without a doubt, create a musical experience that is different from attending a live performance and, in their judgment, unquestionably superior to any later performance, whether recorded or live. Most likely this is due to cultural fetishism, fanaticism, and perhaps an excessive admiration, that represent, even amongst *connoisseurs*, a guarantee for technical reproduction: The recorded performance, experienced and enjoyed strictly as such, becomes the standard for excellence of any other performance, whether recorded or live.

Benjamin was precociously aware of this major aspect of 20th-century culture, society, and technology, which opens up a joyful, or at least hopeful, perspective, precisely in the mid-1930s, a time when culture, society, and technology offered little in the way of hope. Furthermore, Benjamin also seems to propose, often between the lines, that technical reproducibility, which in a certain sense corrupts originality and the aura, is capable of relocating and reconstructing this elsewhere, perhaps at the receptor's end—but let us not get ahead of ourselves. The main point is that Benjamin advocates the intimacy and mutual support that exists between productive and reproductive technologies, as well as the initial impact this undoubtedly has on the diffusion, circulation, and (surely) ownership of the work of art.

From Re-Product to Post-Product

Let us take a step forward: What happens in the case of digital works of art? As noted by Michael Betancourt:

⁴ Gould argued that one should be free to "edit" a sonata by Beethoven or a fugue by Bach, cut into it unrestrictedly and apply post-production techniques: "[I]n this way the composer, the performer and, particularly, the listener, would be better served" (Gould, 1990, p. 359). In fact, as Gould himself would admit, the *Fugue in A minor* from volume I of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* included in the record edited by CBS does not correspond to a unique recording of his, but is a rearrangement of two different recordings.

Every digital reproduction is identical to every other; digital objects are stored as a form of information, rather than limited as physical objects inherently are; thus the digital state can be understood as a form of instrumental language—instructions for executing the “retrieval” that is a specific digital (art) work. (2006, para. 9)

Digital objects are radically different from physical objects. Betancourt distinguishes between a “digital object” materially present to our senses and a “digital work,” i.e., “a series of binary signals recorded by a machine and requiring a machine to render this unseen “code” readable to humans.” This separation between the digital file in binary code form, which is limitlessly copyable, and its effective retrieval using a device which displays it in the form of a still or moving image, or as text, music, or whatever, is a way of resurrecting the aura—the “aura of the information,” in this case. While the material aspects of the digital work appear to be characterized as ephemeral, lasting no longer than the phenomenological encounter with its presentation, the aura of information suggests that the digital itself transcends physical form: the digital work as immortal. An immortality that is no longer associated with the uniqueness of an original which acts as a warranty for all its copies, but with precisely the proliferation of identical instances. A digital master which lives on in the successive textual bodies in which it materializes, across different spaces (surfaces of expression) and times (the evolution of digital technologies in both hardware and software).

It is a paradoxical aura, which resides in a reproducible binary code that is limitlessly copyable (although illegible to humans) and that, depending upon the device in which it is embodied, makes its effective presentation contingent, ephemeral. Moreover, it is, as Betancourt notes, an aura that separates physical materiality from the context of the tradition in which it was produced and, instead, highlights both the contexts of its effective reception and, further still, those of its use, as envisaged by Benjamin. It is an aura which makes sacred the digital but not the digitalized, as this use often anticipates—and even encourages—the transformation of what is received: manipulation of the basic binary code. This creates an obvious problem with accumulation and intellectual property: Access must be regulated, more so than ownership. And once access has been regulated, the conditions of the derived work must be established. Now, we are not only dealing with the confusion between production and reproduction, but also between *reception* and *postproduction*. Let us look at some examples:

- 1) Music fans not only play the tracks of an acquired product as often as they like, they can also select their favorite songs, rename and recompile them at will, producing a new, if unedited, set of tracks, or even edit or sample them, post-producing the product to create personalized listening on a CD or an MP3 player’s playlist. This practice, which became known in the industry as “sampling” in the 1950s (with sampler albums being compilations of various artists from the same label) is now a prerogative of the listener. But the concept went from being an anthology of tracks to being the creation of a new tune through mixing existing tracks, something which is also within reach of the user. Two or three tunes would be mixed to produce a musical mashup, a hitherto-unheard mix of previously released and recognizable tunes.⁵ Video clips are another

⁵ *Riders on the Storm* by The Doors and *Billy Jean* by Michael Jackson are mashed up here, in *Billy Jean on the Storm*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMLFrwK7EYA>

format much favored by the fans of singers and groups, as well as (on the crossover) by lovers of audiovisual creation. There are, of course, "official" clips, but there are also anime music videos (AMV), an entire category of alternative clips, and amateur clips, as well as a universe of home-produced clips which employ images from highly diverse sources set to music, ranging from tributes to the most outrageous parodies. There are also lip-dubs (or mass motion sequence shots with playbacks of hit songs) in which members of a collective generally choreograph a routine around a song.⁶ And new categories of music videos are being created all the time, driven by emulation and even competition. Listeners are transformed into arrangers, their instruments come between the instruments (the "musical" instruments) used for production, the competent performers thereof, and their own listening. Is this, then, an interposition or a continuity of said instruments?

- 2) Painting enthusiasts can download an image from the Internet or scan a printed copy, modify, rename or label it at will, thereby appropriating it (without necessarily avoiding any reference to the "original"). The aforementioned painting by Munch is available on the Internet in hundreds of different ways, as we have pointed out above, with hundreds of variations on the subject, whether they be for the better or for the worse. Photo enthusiasts act similarly, using photographs taken by others or from an image bank and applying computer graphics to these materials. The humoristic dimension of these collage techniques is self-conscious, as if the creators want to insure that the process of "cut and paste" underlying the joke remains evident. Interactive humor, funny photos, maniphotos, phanimation, celebrity soundboards, and PowerPoint humor are recently coined words describing these techniques (Shifman, 2007).
- 3) Movie-buffs and home moviemakers not only play movies and make home videos or DVDs, they also edit, add sound, dub, insert subtitles or signs, visual or sound effects, and design their own trailers. It is also popular to compile anthologies of favorite scenes, organized by director, actor, genre, or subject⁷. A host of *ad hoc* terms is already in circulation to describe all this audiovisual productivity on the part of the user: *synchros*, i.e., split screens with windows showing simultaneous actions viewed at different points in time;⁸ *recaps*, i.e., summaries of a TV season, for example, using a selection of dramatic highlights, often with a voiceover or explanatory subtitles to link the scenes together;⁹ *unofficial trailers*; *alternative endings*; *interstitial stories* which "fill in" the gaps of another product (what did so-and-so from such-and-such series do during the missing two years?); *spoilers*, or unauthorized previews of an essential element of the

⁶ One such example is the University of Quebec, with *I Gotta Feeling* by the Black Eyed Peas: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zcOFN_VBVo

⁷ Selected fragments of the entire film catalog of Quentin Tarantino:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bdovgjn7BY&feature=related>

See also The murder scenes, one after the other, in *The Sopranos*:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhFeZZfUj4>

⁸ Using the film *Elephant* by Gus Van Sant, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZ7aAuGukps>

⁹ Such as the 6th season of *Lost*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOHVuJC1o1Y>

See also this recap of *The Sopranos*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsgRwx7au0>

plot or its denouement, some rather tongue-in-cheek;¹⁰ false trailers for non-existent films, or trailers in which the sound, logos, or montage paradoxically change the genre of a well known film; and homemade clips at the boundary between the music and the video industry, made by amateurs.

- 4) Readers of e-books, or of digitalized literary texts in general, show a tendency toward underlining, annotating, and criticizing these texts. This is obviously nothing new: we readers have been doing so since the dawn of writing. What characterizes the current time is the obsession with sharing these selected quotes, impressions, comments, and comparisons with other earlier or later texts by adding to the original, thus extending and diffusing them. The task of Google Books to digitalize all the books in the world is complemented by the joint, collective, but no less titanic task of giving these books their commentary, their replica, their gloss. In the most elaborate cases, even with parodies, sequels, and prequels, this can mean picking up threads which are intimated but not developed, or following up with secondary characters who are relegated but show promise.
- 5) First, bloggers (more selective) and then social networkers (more frequent and usual), the apex of this electronic Babel, combine the aforementioned multimedia skills and multiply circulation. We are dealing with telematic activity and interactions between individuals and groups that do not simply feed off a product, but moreover, off a *productivity* that is in a process of continuous construction and acquires a precarious stability at the moment in which it is accessed, only to be modified the next time, by our hand or by that of another. Furthermore, the increasingly advanced skills involved in browsing, production, postproduction, and circulating all these different kinds of files give rise to a tidal wave of user-generated content which encroaches upon all the aforementioned media (music, illustration, photography, animation, audiovisual productions, written texts, etc.) and sets them working synergistically through transmedia fictional universes which are as complex as they are, quite consistently, joint and collaborative.¹¹

¹⁰ Like this from the Fine Brothers: "100 Movie Spoilers in 5 Minutes." Pared-down economic resources employed with a fine irony: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hN5avIvyIDw>

¹¹ In other words, so-called *transmedia storytelling*, which is described as the professional *strategy* for producing (and promoting) industrial culture (Jenkins, 2006a; Scolari, 2009) consisting of expanding a fictional universe through different media (film, TV, comics, books) and platforms (blogs, forums, wikis, social networks), has its replica in the *tactics* of users, who create an entire parallel and complementary narrative, colonizing the unoccupied narrative spaces, the virgin lands of this universe. Television series such as *Lost* (ABC, 2001–2006) and *True Blood* (HBO, 2008–), among many others, and also franchises of publishing or movie origin (*Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*) have not only been expanded through different media and platforms, but have also stimulated creativity in the form of user-generated content. Production teams have often reused, in terms of narrative, what was originally amateur content submitted free of charge online. Three consequences can be highlighted of this strategy-tactics mix in transmedia storytelling: 1) the potential for enjoyment which can be generated by this way of audiences viewing, understanding, and participating; 2) audiences' increased skills and abilities for transmedia surfing; and 3) the adoption and adaptation of the logic of games into mass-media fiction, so

All of this does not strictly enter the dominion of the habitual Internet user; it also falls within the still institutionalized artistic practices themselves—in other words, the fields of literary, plastic, cinematographic, or musical arts—which have replicated this vast (post)productivity of the “sampler” (Bourriaud, 2005) or “remixer” (Manovich, 2005) in their works.

Thus: *product*, *re-product* and, finally, *co-product*? *post-product*? *trans-product*? *e-product*? A product which is not only in transit, but is being remade while it transits and because it transits. Said digital transit, then, represents the happy encounter of the aura of an origin with the imprint of the reproduction, as discerned by Benjamin. All this is accompanied by the successive imprints of multiple reproductions which will keep on coming, one after the other. Of course, some will only be reproduced as streamings, downloads, or copy-and-pastes of an identical digital master, but others will be veritable edits, as authentic author-izations: the *auctor*, in the etymological sense, was the person who augmented (*augmentation* and *author* come from *augere*, to increase, also giving rise, in a way, to author-ize).¹²

Strictly speaking, more than being confusing, what production/reproduction and reception/postproduction do is share, to a great extent, the same instruments and same actions. Acclaimed musicians, moviemakers, videographers, press editors, publicists, and plastic artists increasingly and decisively practice the technique of presenting the Internet-based public, sometimes organized into very active communities, their partial or completed works for the purpose of receiving feedback, reactions, proposals, collaboration—all user-generated content (Jenkins, 2006b). Lev Manovich questions whether, in this digital era, culture will not end up being divided into discrete units designed to be copied and integrated within larger modules, like LEGO bricks. Blocks which contain all of the information required in order to be easily attached to others, to be adapted to facilitate this attachment, and also to record, at any given moment, the historical sequence of loans which, as a whole, result in the product as it stands. Bricks which, moreover, are displayed in a quasi unlimited showcase in such a way that users can endorse them and express their support for the changing contents. In other words, he foretells a “cultural modularity” in which, paradoxically a priori, there is no minimum delimited vocabulary

that fictions are a place not only of contemplative and essentially passive enjoyment, but also of active enjoyment which demands working with the products, circulating them, enriching them, connecting them with other fictional universes—a tendency toward resolving them like a game.

¹² Let us note that almost all of the definitions of digital piracy in circulation (OED, Webster’s, Wikipedia) stress that it is the *unauthorized* reproduction or use of something, such as a book, recording, computer program, film, etc. It is paradoxical that condemnation of *unauthorized* copies now has little to do with the actual author who is being copied and more to do with the entity that holds the rights (the publishing house, record label, film distributor). And, by contrast, that the person who challenges this authority often becomes the author (let’s say *aug-men-tor*) of the author, in that etymological sense of augmenting or extending an existing work without thereby corrupting it or seeking to arrogate ownership or rights. The condemnation of digital piracy indiscriminately lumps together the action of pirates who trade commercially with works subject to copyright and the action of users who appropriate the work to recreate it, augment it, give it new meaning and a new direction, and then share their product. To identify such piracy, which is often non-venal transit and recreation, with theft—as is done in an unskippable anti-piracy film included in some movie DVDs—is unfair.

(given that the modular seems to require a finite series of minimal units, the combination of which results in an exponential variety). This modularity does not reduce the total number of units to be combined, but rather, it allows the modification of each unit during each use, thereby guaranteeing an innovative final result (Manovich, 2005).

From the DJs of the 1980s to the current *geeks* who remix and fine-tune cultural products that are in circulation, such as photographs, songs, films, television series, videogames, and their corresponding promotional subproducts (trailers, clips, promos, etc.) and return them to the Internet, edited but remixable (*lip-dubs*, *mashups*, *public movies*), all the fan culture in general assumes a modular logic (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b). These interventions are, to a great extent, ironic and parodic (Shifman, 2007). On the one hand, they recognize (and do not try to hide) this assembly of preformed parts, citations, allusions, and intertextual gestures, and on the other, they give value to a democratized creativity of diffuse and jointly-owned authorship.¹³

From Experience to Experiment

Recently, cultural objects in their most noble form seem to aim to be "appropriated" by the reader, listener, or spectator, not only as the object of their contemplation, but also as an operation; not only as an experience, but also as an experiment. They are definitely more open to being manipulated and handled; they offer a moment of reading, listening, or contemplating, surely, while at the same time, there is an invitation to write, compose, and design, to implicate oneself through participation and co-production. In addition, we could say that modern technologies which act as the means of support for cultural goods—literature, painting, film, music—have substantially modified our way of understanding how to deal with them.

Cultural experience was, before, a *circumscribed* activity, exclusively applied to an object, and therefore *intense* and almost always *intimate*. Meanwhile, today, a valued cultural experience is one that does not seem to fix its attention on one particular point, unraveling it in detail, but rather, it follows a trajectory which jumps from one point to another, stopping at any specific point only long enough to gather momentum to move on to the next interconnected point. It's not a matter of diving down into the

¹³ An urgent question must be raised at this point. It would be naive to ignore the fact that the percentage of users who effectively participate creatively in this postproductivity is, while growing, relatively small. Manovich provides a pertinent figure: In 2007, only between 0.5 and 1.5% of users of the most popular sites classified as social media (Flickr, YouTube, Wikipedia) contributed with their own content. But for the same year, research conducted by Michael Wesch shows that commercially produced videos comprised only 14% of YouTube content, with the remaining 86% made up of user-generated content. Small but highly active communities drive much of this. An added complication, noted by Manovich (2008): how to draw the dividing line between professional and amateur products? Is it that professionals cannot imitate the "carelessness," the homemade touch of regular users? Is it that industry professionals (software or hardware manufacturers, Internet or mobile phone service providers, the companies behind the social media) cannot hide what they are, but use contributions to promote profitable traffic to these pages?

depths to recover a hidden, though identified, treasure, but rather, it is one of quickly surfing along the surface's intermittently emergent crests, which may crash over us and swallow us up if we stop too long.¹⁴

If we look closely, this is precisely how Internet works, with a hypertextuality that *mines* (or *contaminates* or *sows*) each text with links that lead to all kinds of other texts, inviting us to jump from one to another without having even, perhaps, finished reading the text displayed before us, and which is already disappearing from view (although always recoverable) in our search for another which grabs our attention, and so on. This same experience of connection is what hierarchizes Google searches: the list of results is not ordered so much according to how many times the word we are searching for appears in the text, but rather, according to how many documents are linked to the text we are presumably searching for, and which will therefore prove to be the most useful to us, precisely because these are the most connected documents on the Internet. Therefore, these documents have the most interconnections between pieces of knowledge that form a series which is practically infinite, but which is especially *broad* and *attractive* at certain points (Battelle, 2006).

In today's panorama, a heterogeneous public is presented with an elaborated, but as yet unfinished and open-ended, product, presented both as a "figure," and as the possibility for "configuration"; as finished pieces, and as an instruction manual for building something previously unknown, foreseen but not present. Enjoyment of the product is achieved not so much through mere contemplation, but rather, by creating a finished product, albeit it a provisional one, as there always exists the possibility of recovering the original condition and opting for a different reconstruction—a finished product. The placement of an "order," to the contrary of what occurred during times of patronage, does

¹⁴ By the mid-1930s, Benjamin was already speaking of that disconcerting mix between the voracity of cultural and aesthetic stimuli from the public, and (at the same time) the inconstancy, impatience, and dispersed average attention span.

The film makes the cult value recede in to the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one. (1969, pp. 240–241)

Not only do we find the urgency of pronouncing an opinion here (a non-expert but nevertheless firm opinion), but also the will to participate, for now, in the print culture:

For centuries a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers. This changed toward the end of the last century. With the increasing extension of the press, which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers—at first, occasional ones. It began with the daily press opening to its readers space for 'letters to the editor.' And today there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. (ibid., pp. 231–232)

See Eiland (2003) on these aspects of Benjamin's work.

not happen at the beginning of the work, but upon its completion; it is not an order from a client to a cultural producer, but rather, from the cultural producer to the client, who appropriates the work not merely by purchasing it as part of a lot identical to one acquired by many other buyers, but by finishing it through an appropriation which is not strictly commercial in nature and which presupposes (and this is the essence of the business) the client's access to similar instruments used in its production by the issuing entity. This is the case with many current artistic approaches which take the idea of "open work" to its ultimate consequences, not only as regards interpretative closure (mental), but also regarding physical participation and intervention (interactive installations, video art), and involving entertainment-related technologies (karaoke, videogames, virtual reality, video game consoles) and, in general, cultural experiences in which digitization, interactive computerization, and advanced interfaces intervene. If we include connection to the Internet, this opening-up of the process is multiplied exponentially, and it is even more evident that 1) reception and consumption are potentially creative (and digital platforms actively promote this creative participation), 2) this user-generated content circulates freely, open to new creative reappropriations, and 3) the increase in culture owned by others neither undermines nor threatens our own, but rather reinforces it through cooperative exchanges (*Creative Commons* and *copyleft* licenses, P2P protocols for file sharing, circulation of free software, etc.).

If, as Morin yearned for in the 1960s, the cultural industry were to consist of a collection of mechanisms and operations through which cultural *creation* was transformed into *production*, then the new paradigm of production, which transfers completion and even endorsement of the productive process to the reception of the product itself by a multitude of possible destinations (perhaps partially predetermined, but with a great degree of uncertainty nevertheless), should be christened with a name that accounts for this mutation (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2011). Terms such as *postproduction* (Bourriaud, 2005), *remixability* or *software culture* (Manovich, 2005), *mass self-communication* (Castells, 2009), amongst others, have been proposed and already circulate. The old pairs of creation/enjoyment or production/consumption are insufficient and fail to consider the complexity of the situation.

Conclusions

Since Benjamin, we have become used to speaking of an author's work as a *production*, and of the cultural industry as offering *reproductions* which lack the aura of an original that was directly manipulated by its author. This was a prerogative of cultural production over other types of industrial manufacturing: no one would even think of considering a soft drink can or an automobile off a Ford-type assembly line as either a *reproduction* or a *copy*, but rather as a product (Lash & Urry, 1994). However, we do so with books, records, DVDs, or the publishing of pictorial works. We have already observed that Benjamin was precisely aware of how photographic or cinematographic copies jeopardized the notion of original. And we have observed how digital reproducibility extends and radicalizes this tendency by definitively shattering the hierarchy of original then copy, by consecrating digital files as auratic treasures which are no less valuable for having been reproduced and copied, and which are, at the same time, open to recreative manipulation, open to use (and abuse).

In brief, what we have explored here is the extension of the phenomena: Not only do production and reproduction converge, but they both also converge with reception and postproduction. Not only is

production carried out bearing in mind reproduction, but it also depends on reception and postproduction. Nevertheless, it is not merely a matter of the *lector in fabula* or the *spectator in spectaculo*, in other words, prefiguring the model receptor in the text. The intended receptor is not only contemplative, but also participative: He or she must be capable of intervening in, manipulating, and (provisionally) finishing the product. Therefore, it is not a matter of merely acquiring the product (a possessive piracy, as in the accumulative logic of libraries, record or video collections, which are often inactive and inert—ROM, HD, or downloading logic, by the person accumulating the material just in case there's time later to watch, read, or listen to it, who foresees enjoyment but might not be able to fulfill this desire). Rather, it is a matter of doing something with it, a piracy which does not just involve collecting treasures, but reminting the coins, adding the pirate's own stamp, and making them available to others by recirculating them, for free, a type of piracy which conciliates appropriation and conviviality—RAM, access and streaming logic by someone who does actually watch, listen, or read what he or she acquires, and does not merely accumulate for accumulation's sake, but enjoys the material. It is this enjoyment that produces a comment, a recommendation, a critique or an intervention—the (authorized) consumer as postproducer, to paraphrase, once again, Walter Benjamin.

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